

News focus

European dissent over GM crops

The European Union has failed to quell the revolt among its member states over the union-wide acceptance of GM crops. Soon the four rebels could gain Germany as a new ally. **Michael Gross** reports.

Bavaria, the self-styled 'free state' among the other mere 'Länder' of the Federal Republic of Germany, has always been a special case. The leading party, CSU, has kept itself separate from Merkel's CDU, which serves the same kind of customer base elsewhere in the country, and has thus acquired a unique position of power beyond the number of its voters. It has cleverly combined a conservatism deeply rooted in the agricultural tradition of the area with an openness for modern technology, embracing even highly controversial ventures like atomic energy and the canal connecting the rivers Main and Danube.

This unquestioning attitude towards technology may be about to change, as the CSU is withdrawing its support for genetically modified (GM) crops, of which Monsanto's maize breed MON810 is the only one currently permitted in Europe and thus in Bavaria. The recently appointed federal minister for food, agriculture, and consumer

protection, Ilse Aigner (CSU), used a press interview on the occasion of her 100th day in office to proclaim that "green gene technology does not bring any discernible benefit to people in this country. The consumers reject genetically manipulated plants. The farmers don't want them either."

Aigner expressed her support for the Bavarian minister for the environment, Markus Söder, who had previously demanded to turn the free state into a GM-free state. However, she cautioned that the legal situation did not make it easy for her to simply ban GM, as the companies have a legal right to get the GM seeds licensed provided they meet the legal requirements. Aigner has promised that she will look very closely at the monitoring plan due to be delivered by Monsanto in April, and that she will withdraw the licence if she finds fault with it.

At the grass roots, a colourful coalition of environmentalists, beekeepers, and ecofarmers is

taking up the fight against the GM crops, and occasionally visit one of the few GM farms to pull up the offending plants. Not that there are too many places to visit. Monsanto had planned to cover 40,000 hectares of German farmland with MON810 by this year, but has had to admit that it only reached 10 per cent of this amount by last year. And in the current situation, it could see that amount reduced to zero at any time.

The environmental organisation BUND (incidentally also very deeply rooted in Bavaria, though active across Germany) sees the shift in the CSU policy on GM crops as an opportunity to apply leverage at the federal level. BUND chairman Hubert Weiger has called for CSU chief and head of the Bavarian state government, Horst Seehofer, to take up the fight over national GM food policy with Angela Merkel's federal government. BUND wants the German government to use clause 23 of the EU guideline on release of GM organisms, which the GM rebels Austria, Greece, France, and Hungary have also done.

If and when the Bavarian rebels manage to turn round the federal



Rebellion: Brussels has given permission for only one GM crop to be planted in the EU so far, but a growing number of member states are refusing to allow it. (Photo: © European Community.)

policy on GM crops, this will be the last nail in the coffin of the European Commission's efforts to restore an EU-wide pro-GM stance. In recent months, decisions over GM licences have bounced back and forth between the commission and the meeting of the environment ministers of the member states. On March 2nd, the ministers voted against the commission's proposal to overturn the GM bans in Austria and Hungary, following up on previous failed attempts to bring France and Greece back in line. Austria's environment minister Niki Berlakovic showed himself jubilant after the decision. "I am very happy and proud that we have prevailed. The fight was worthwhile, and I could convince a sufficient number of colleagues to vote for Austria's GM-free cultivation. This is an incredible success for Austria, and it shows that, within the EU, individual interests can be accepted, if one has the better arguments," he said. On the back of this perceived anti-GM success, Luxembourg joined the rebels last month and declared it would not permit planting of the GM maize.

Fellow GM rebel France is also in fighting spirits and set up a national council for genetically modified organisms in December. The membership is split halfway between scientists and lay people representing political and society interests, so the chair of the council will have the deciding vote if one half turns against the other. Finding the right person for this hot seat turned out to be a tricky problem but now the government appears to be set to appoint CNRS president Catherine Bréchinac, who has not taken sides in the debate so far.

In February, the regulatory committee for GM crops at EU level failed to agree on an approval of two new maize breeds, passing this hot topic on to the environment ministers. Given the way the mood seems to be changing across Europe, the number of GM crops grown in the union may not be set to increase for a while, and Monsanto, as the one and only licensed purveyor of GM in the EU, may be fighting a losing battle.

The growing GM challenge

Frustration at the public resistance to GM crops in Europe is leading to campaigns to highlight future developments. **Nigel Williams** reports.

There's no doubt many European states are delighted with their resistance to genetically modified crops but, amongst some senior European politicians, these actions are missing the point: future environmental and economic conditions may stretch conventional food production and GM technology could provide key support.

The British prime minister, Gordon Brown, is one of the latest European leaders to be reported to want to change the EU's stance on GM crops. While officially neutral, he is keen to

see the scientific arguments for the potential in GM crops to be presented to the sceptical European public.

And last year, leaked documents to the press suggested Jose Barroso, president of the European Commission, had sought ways to reverse the substantial opposition amongst European consumers to GM crops.

Brown has asked the UK's chief scientific adviser, John Beddington, to lead a study on how to feed the world up to 2050 when the human population may be as high as nine billion.

It's been more than a decade since biotech companies led by Monsanto began to transform agriculture by transferring genes from bacteria into crop plants or between different plants. This first generation of transgenics were mostly cash crops, such as herbicide-resistant soybeans and maize. Big farmers found them



Michael Gross is a science writer based at Oxford. He can be contacted via his web page at www.michaelgross.co.uk

Shunned: GM maize not only resists pests but much of the European public seems to want to keep away too. (Photo: Chris Napton/Alamy.)